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## DISAPPEARING AUTHORS.

BY JUSTIN M'CARTHY.

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BEFORE entering on my theme I think it well to say that, when I write of disappearing authors, I do not mean authors of the revolving-light order, whose rays disappear from our sight for a moment, only to shine as brightly as ever in the certain moment of return. There are some authors, and really great authors, too, whose fame seems to be governed by a sort of process of regular action and reaction. The author is cried up during the later years of his successful working time and for a while after his death, and then the reaction sets in. People begin to say that too much has been made of him, a new school arises by whom he is proclaimed to be old-fashioned, and it gets to be the right sort of thing not to admire him or even to talk about him any more; and so, for the time, the author has disappeared. But if there was any real stuff in him the disappearance is only for a time. He outlives the reaction against him, he outlives the school which, for a time, was successful in crying him down, and he comes back to his former fame at the call of a new generation.

Macaulay was an author of this order. All the reading world went wild over him during his later years, and then after his death a reaction took place, and those who claimed the right to dictate to public opinion pronounced that Macaulay was nothing but well-balanced antithesis and elaborate exaggeration. But already Macaulay is coming back, and we find his imitators even among the school of those who but lately were professing their scorn for him. Something of the same kind might be said concerning an author of later date and very different qualities, the author whom we still describe as George Eliot. George Eliot was idolized in her time; she was declared by many critics to be superior to Dickens and Thackeray, to Scott and Fielding. I heard one highly

accomplished woman announce that, having read one of George Eliot's novels, she would never read any other novels, because she did not believe that any other novels could be worth the reading. Later, however, there came, at least in England, a decided reaction against George Eliot, and people who wished to be sure of saying the right thing would shake their heads when her name was mentioned and declare that she had been utterly overrated and that her day was done. In George Eliot's case, too, the reaction soon spent its force, and even young persons now are not afraid to say that they admire "*Adam Bede*" and "*The Mill on the Floss*." I am inclined to think that both Tennyson and Browning are passing through the period of reaction also; but in their case, too, the revolving lights, if I may return to my former metaphor, may be expected to turn their full rays upon us soon again.

Such are not the disappearing authors concerning whom I wish to write. My subject has to do with the authors against whom there is no visible reaction, who are not disparaged or underrated by any school of critics, or indeed by criticism of any kind, but who were undoubtedly very popular at one time, and whose popularity is now unmistakably fading. The disappearing authors whom I have in my mind do not, any of them, represent any set school of literature. If they did, their disappearance might be easily explained. It might be said that the public grow tired of the ways, the fashions, the tricks of a school, and are glad to be rid of them once for all. But some of the authors whose disappearance, gradual though it be, I cannot help observing and whose disappearance I personally regret, were not followers of any particular school, had no set mannerisms or fads, and were indeed in their way thoroughly original. Take, for instance, such a man as Charles Kingsley. Kingsley did not attach himself to any school, so far as novel writing was concerned. In such a book as "*Alton Locke*," he drew directly from the life he saw around him. There was nothing in a school of literature which flourished at or before his time that could have taught him anything about the scenes he had to picture in his romance. But I wonder what proportion of English-speaking novel readers take much interest just now in "*Alton Locke*." The same question may be asked about any other of his novels. Yet there has been no reaction against Kingsley that I could see. No sets of new critics have gone to work to disparage him and to teach us that we were all wrong when we consented

to admire him. I am afraid there can be no doubt that he is one of the disappearing authors.

What about Anthony Trollope? Was not Anthony Trollope popular, even during the days of Dickens and Thackeray? And who ever preached a reactionary crusade against him? Yet is he not fast disappearing from the attention of our novel readers? Trollope, unlike most successful novelists, was himself made sensible during his later years of a steady decline of his popularity. I heard a well-known London publisher once say that the novelist who had once obtained by any process a complete popular success never could lose it during his life time; that, let him write as carelessly and as badly as he might, his life time could not last long enough to enable him to shake off his public. But the facts of Trollope's literary career show that the declaration of my publisher friend was too sweeping in its terms. For several years before his death, Trollope's prices were steadily falling off. Now, one seldom hears him talked of; one hardly ever hears a citation from him in a newspaper or a magazine.

Charles Reade, too, that strenuous, masculine, masterful novelist, must he not be regarded as one of the disappearing? Probably it may be said that most of Reade's novels were novels with a purpose, novels written to expose some social grievance, or some iniquity of legislation; and that, with the gradual accomplishment of the purpose, the interest in the book necessarily fades, just as the speeches of the political reformer soon cease to be read when once the reform has been accomplished. Still, I should have thought that the artistic workmanship of most of Reade's books was good enough to secure for them a life with the ever-living works of fiction. Moreover, the one of Reade's novels which has usually been accounted his very best—I mean "*The Cloister and the Hearth*"—has nothing to do with law reform of any kind, and I have lately seen it stated, on what appears to be good authority, that "*The Cloister and the Hearth*" is the one of Reade's books which would have the poorest chance just now of a large circulation in a cheap form. Besides, we have to remember that most of Dickens's stories are concerned about social or legal reform of some kind; and, although we have got rid of schools like Dotheboys Hall, and no longer allow imprisonment for debt, still the very youngest among us is not likely to class Charles Dickens among disappearing authors.

I am afraid my old countryman, Charles Lever, must be consigned to that vanishing order, although some of us can well recollect the day when the red-covered monthly parts of his stories used to be looked for with almost as keen an interest as the yellow covers of Thackeray or even the green covers of Dickens. Perhaps it may not be altogether unnecessary to explain to an American reader who has not yet passed middle age, or, indeed, for that matter, to some English readers in the same blessed condition as to years, that the novels of Dickens, Thackeray and Lever used to make their appearance in monthly parts, twenty-three parts constituting a story, and the twenty-third containing two instalments issued together in order not to tax too severely the impatient curiosity of the reader. I think the last English novelist who thus appeared in monthly parts was my old friend Shirley Brooks, who belongs, I regret to say, not to the ranks of the disappearing, but of the disappeared. Now, Lever's novels had nothing to do with law reform, or social reform of any kind; they did not depend for their interest on the existence of any particular grievance; they were undoubtedly clever, brilliant and original in their own way; and yet there can be little doubt that they are disappearing from among us. It cannot even be said, with regard to the best known among them, that they tell of lives and people whose ways were not our ways, and that, therefore, we are ceasing to care about them, because, I believe, there are Fox Hunts and Steeple Chases going on at this very day, and I read in the papers that English soldiers and Irish soldiers are being killed together on the far-off battle-field, while I am working at these pages.

I have often read and heard, of late, that certain novels are no longer popular because they are old-fashioned, and I have entangled myself in many futile discussions as to what constitutes, in that disparaging sense, an old-fashioned novel. Is a novel old-fashioned because it describes manners and customs and costumes which are now out of date? If this be so, then, of course, Dickens and Thackeray, to say nothing of poor Walter Scott, are old-fashioned, and "*The House of the Seven Gables*" has nothing to do with the fashions of to-day, and *Jane Eyre* is a hopelessly old-fashioned little person, and *Romola* herself is hardly up to date. Do the censors of the old-fashioned mean to tell us that we ought to read nothing in the shape of a novel unless it occupies itself only with the manners and customs of the year or the week in

which we live? But then, if they do say this, how do they explain the popularity of Dr. Conan Doyle and Mr. Stanley Weyman in their scores of adventures in the far-off days of romance? I have, indeed, argued the point with some critics who maintained that Conan Doyle and Stanley Weyman could not be set down as old-fashioned because, although they sometimes dealt with old-fashioned subjects, they always treated them in a new-fashioned and up-to-date sort of way. But even this way of looking at the matter would only put off for a little the fate of Conan Doyle and Stanley Weyman, because, after a short lapse of time, their very way of treating the subjects will itself seem old-fashioned to a new and a pert generation, and there will be an end of them. I do not think, therefore, that we can account for an author's disappearance merely on the ground that he is growing old-fashioned and that he is not up to date. Nor do I think it can be settled merely by a general declaration that all the really great authors shine for ever, and that only those disappear whose light has lost its power of illumining the human heart and intellect any more. This, of course, if we could all accept it, would be a very satisfactory and comfortable application of the doctrine that proclaims the "survival of the fittest," and there would be no occasion for argument or protest or pity. But I cannot, for myself, quite accept this dogmatic conclusion. There are some of the disappearing authors who have written books which seem to me quite as well entitled to hold a place in what may be called our classic literature, as some of those which we all believe to be firmly enthroned there.

I do not quite know where to look for two short novels, little one-volume stories, which have in them more truth and tenderness, more genuine human feeling, and more faithful local color than are illustrated in Anthony Trollope's "Linda Tressel" and "Nina Balatka." These stories were published anonymously, because Trollope wanted to try whether he could make a success in scenes and atmosphere and a kind of life which he had never touched before; and, in order to give the public a better chance of forming an unprejudiced judgment, he did not put his name to either of them. The stories, however, delighted the critics, and, for the time, delighted the general public. After a while, Trollope acknowledged their authorship, and most of us declared that he had never done better work in his life. But I do not suppose that any one reads these stories now, and the Trollope who still lingers

among us is the Trollope of "Barchester Towers" and "Phineas Finn." Of course, one has to feel much the same kind of wonder when thinking of some of the books that, with their authors, are not merely disappearing, but have absolutely disappeared. There was an effort made in London some few years ago to tempt the public—I mean the English-speaking public—into a readmission of the two Hajji Baba novels into popularity. They had a great run in their day, these two novels, "The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan" and "Hajji Baba in England," about the time when Captain Marryatt's sea stories were at the height of their celebrity; and I think for genuine humor, broad knowledge of human nature, and a keen appreciation of the Eastern way of looking at things, it would be hard to beat Morier's two stories, which tell how Hajji Baba rose from his humble position in Persia to be the Secretary of the Persian Minister in London. But the attempt lately made to get the newer public to take any interest in Hajji Baba's adventures was, I believe, a total failure.

I wonder how many of my readers could tell me, without consulting a biographical dictionary, who was Mrs. Marsh? Yet Mrs. Marsh was a very popular novelist within my own recollection, and there is a story of hers called "The Admiral's Daughter" which is curiously bold, original and successful in its drawing of character, and rises at its close to a tragic power and pathos which might seem to assure, as well as deserve, an abiding fame. I read the book when I was a young man, and was deeply impressed by it, and at that time, as I have said, the authoress was popular. Only a few years ago, I came by chance on a cheap copy of the volume containing it, "Two Old Men's Tales," of which "The Admiral's Daughter" was the longer and the more important. I read the story over again, and was fully confirmed in the judgment I had formed of it so many years before. I tried to get some of my friends to read it, but was not very successful. Some of them had never heard of it, and did not seem inclined to believe that a book could have great merits and yet never have forced itself on their attention. One man told me that he had read it on my suggestion, but that it did not belong to the modern movement of fiction and it therefore failed to interest him. I pointed out to him that it might distinctly be classed as a problem novel, although it was written before the days when the problem novel had set itself up as an institution, and had been proclaimed as a school.

“Don’t you see,” I vainly pleaded, “that the whole story turns on the fortunes of three persons, two men and a woman, all three being delightful and excellent persons in themselves, and that the tragedy and the trouble arose from two of the three getting married under the impression that they would keep on in love with each other for ever, and then the third person finding himself in love where he ought not to be, and so on to the fate of all three.” I do not myself particularly admire the problem novel; but, as my friend raised objection to the story I favored, on the ground that it was not in the movement of modern fiction, I had a faint hope of conquering his objection by urging that it was as good a problem novel as any other, and that the problem is admitted to be a peculiar growth of modern fiction. Now, I can quite understand how a novel can cease to be popular, and at the same time become classic. The book undergoes a fate not unlike that which occasionally befell some Homeric hero who lost his life on the battle-field and disappeared for ever from the gaze of mortal men, but who was rewarded for his virtue and his valor by being turned into a demi-god and reverenced as such for evermore.

We know that the modern reader, as we find him in ordinary life, never thinks of reading Fielding, or perhaps even Walter Scott; that he has probably never heard of “Anastasius;” that he has never troubled himself even with an attempt to read Jane Austen’s novels, and probably never saw a copy of Mrs. Inchbald’s “Simple Story.”

But then, it may be said, the authors of these books, if they still concern themselves with the affairs of earth, have the pride of knowing that they are regarded as demi-gods. Even those who never read Fielding, or Miss Austen, or Scott, or Mrs. Inchbald, are quite willing, whenever occasion calls for such an act, to render homage to the merits of these illustrious authors. The ordinary mortal would be rather slow to admit, in the presence of his intellectual superiors, that he knew nothing at all about the merits of the authors whom they agreed to regard as classic, and therefore he mumbles his tribute of respect to the great departed and he goes back to his Marie Corelli and his Guy Boothby. But I confess to a great feeling of regret and a great impulse to remonstrance on account of the fate of the authors who have just missed becoming classic and have in consequence become déclassé.

I feel, however, that I have been wandering from the lines of  
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my original purpose, which was to deal with the authors who are disappearing, and that I am now going out of my way to lament over some of the authors who have actually disappeared. I do not think there is among English-speaking races so great a desire to hurry the departure of the disappearing authors as there is in France.

In the literary France of the present day I am assured, on competent authority, that there is a positive eagerness to "speed the parting guest" in that sense, and an almost virulent impulse to get rid of him once for all, and fill his place with some one new. In the present anxiety for novelty, which prevails, I am told, in France, the next thing that happens, after a man has obtained a settled reputation, is that the critics pronounce him to belong already to the old school, and say that he had better cease to lag superfluous on the stage. There would seem to be three stages in the career of a French literary man, according to this account—first, the striving after a reputation; second, the reputation achieved, and, third, the intimation that he has done his work and that the world wants no more of him. Of course, I do not suppose, for a moment, that this impatience of the older school and tumultuous welcome of any newer school applies to the really great minds in any department of letters. Balzac and Victor Hugo, I presume, do not grow old. The growing intolerance of authors who belong to an older epoch, asserts itself, I take it for granted, only against the class I have been venturing to describe as disappearing authors.

But among English-speaking readers and writers, public and critics alike, there is, I think, no such desire to be rid of our old friends, and to give their places to newer comers.

English and American writers have not, in general, the same ardent desire to form themselves into schools that the observant world has noticed among the literary men and women of France. Now and then, of course, such a fashion does arise, and the consequent phenomena present themselves, as in the case of the æsthetic school in England and the Boston school in America. Whenever a school of literature is ostentatiously set up it is certain, almost in the nature of things, that there will sooner or later be a revolt against the authority of that school, and men with ideas which profess to be newer will claim a right to take the place of their elders. In this way, perhaps, it comes to pass that in France there

is so marked an anxiety to let the seniors feel that the time has come for them to take a back seat, and allow the new men to come to the front.

But I do not think that such is the feeling with which in England and America we regard our disappearing authors. We do not want them to disappear, we are not always conscious that they are disappearing, we might perhaps entreat some of them to stay with us if we knew that they were taking their departure; but we do not notice their going at the time, and after a while we become conscious that they are gone.

I have been writing of novelists; but I think my observations will apply equally to authors in any department of literary art. Everybody must have observed, or at any rate may have observed, that there are authors of histories, authors of essays, authors of plays, authors of scientific books, who were very popular some time ago, and are now beginning to fade out of the world's notice without giving any indication that they are likely, by any reaction of enthusiasm in the public mind, to be exalted into the Elysian fields of the classics.

A poet who was not very long ago popular in England, and whom I knew personally as well as in his poems, complained in verse that we are apt to "honor overmuch the mighty dead, and dispirit living merit, heaping scorn upon its head." I certainly do not think that such a charge could be fairly sustained against England or America, and I think the present tendency in France is decidedly the other way—to honor too little the mighty dead, and to make a great deal too much fuss about living merit. I have sometimes wondered how a disappearing author, if he were conscious that he had outlived his popularity, would accept the recognition of the fact.

Would he take it in the spirit of an ancient philosopher—at least as the ancient philosophers are declared by their admiring disciples to have taken discouraging decrees of fate?

Would it be comfort enough for him to know that he had had his day?

I suppose it would depend in very large measure on the temperament rather than upon the philosophy of the disappearing author. I should think Anthony Trollope would have taken it composedly enough, and that Charles Reade, if he could have been convinced by any power of evidence that such a fate was awaiting

him, would have stormed against the destinies and anathematized the upcoming generation which was to permit of his disappearance. There are two consoling reflections for those who are disposed, as I am, to muse in melancholy fashion over the disappearing author. The first is that, in most cases, the author thus doomed, may not have the least suspicion that he is disappearing, and the second is that, in the rare cases where he has such a suspicion, he may get it firmly into his mind that he is only disappearing from mortal sight to become a demi-god, that he is ~~only~~ vanishing from the classes to become a classic.

JUSTIN McCARTHY.